# COLOURS AND NUMBERS IN INDIAN TEMPLE LEGENDS *(STHALA PURĀṆAS)*

*Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi*

This paper (1) anticipates some of the theoretical arguments to be discussed in a larger study on *sthala purāṇas*, which wishes to prove that myths, legends and other folk narrative are polythetic-prototype classes possessing preferred elements but no constants. In the binominal "polythetic-prototype" the first term refers to the fact that no non-arbitrary boundaries separate either different narrative genres or myth "cycles" and that any mythical motif may be combined with any other one without necessarily following a binary logic. The second term refers to points where the fluidity of the polythetic class decreases without reaching constancy however. This paper is concerned with some of these prototypical features of *sthala purāṇas*. It tries to demonstrate that the mythmaker has favourite colours and numbers and that the latter are far from restricted to the dyad in the form of binary opposites. The application of data derived from temple legends to myths is justified by the fact that the semantic domains of the myth and the legend overlap largely and that the meaning of the pan-Indian Sanskrit word *purāṇa* includes both types of folk narrative.

## 1. Colours

From the almost inexhaustible wealth of Indian mythology I have selected *sthala purāṇas* which speak of a cow pouring out her milk on her own accord and/or the discovery of a bleeding *liṅgam*. Starting from this arbitrary double focus I have then extended my research to tales dealing with milk and blood in any other context or containing motifs often met in conjunction with milk and blood. Milk and blood resemble each other and differ from each other in so many ways that they constitute an ideal pair from the structuralist point of view.

In the most abstract sense, however, their colour contrast has been responsible for my choice. Some temple legends themselves abstract colour from the vital fluids, when for instance the bleeding wound in a stone leaves a red scar (Census of India 1964*d*:128) or the *liṅgam* discovered thanks to the self-milking cow is white in memory of the milk bath it once received (Shulman 1980:97).

Milk and blood like their white and red colours are well suited to express symbolic meanings. Blood and the red colour as such universally suggest both positive and negative associations, but the positive ones seems to predominate. In *sthala purāṇas* blood oozing out from an object is mostly the result of an involuntary act of violence, a negative event. In a positive sense, however, red blood acts as a striking sign of life in a seemingly lifeless object that alerts people to the divine presence. The reddish colour of the lotus flower emphasizing, as it were, its beautiful shape may have a similar signalling function (Census of India 1965:10; 1966*a*:329).

With very few exceptions the colour white is universally seen in a positive light. The positive value attributed to pure and nourishing milk is enhanced by its white colour, itself a standard symbol of purity. In *sthala purāṇas* white in the form of milk has many positive associations. If it appears, however, independently of milk, its major function again seems to be to indicate the divine manifestation. White strikes the eye above all in things which normally have unsightly grey or brownish colour. If a cow pours her milk on a white stone (Himachala Pradesh District Gazetteers 1975:477-478) or a white (2) anthill in which a white boar disappeared is bathed with milk (Pidatale Sitapati 1968:125), the repetition of whiteness increases its signalling function. Viṣṇu appearing as a white boar or a goddess manifesting herself in a white stone might be interpreted in the sense that the deities wish to stress their purity through colour. This interpretation would be certainly aberrant, however, if the miracle cow happens to be black.

People all over the world attribute to the black colour predominantly a negative value, even though the opposite positive evaluation is not particularly rare; much less so than the opposite negative evaluation of predominantly positive whiteness. According to Turner (1967:82) «in many African societies black has an auspicious connotation». Also the Indians see black not only in a negative light. Black-skinned low caste girls are reputed for their beauty only as lovers, however, and not when marriages are arranged (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1983*a*:143). A cow suckling her calf is a far too common sight to signal the hiding place of the god under a bush in *sthala purāṇas*, even if the god appearing in his devotee's dream has revealed the name of

the bush. If he adds that the cow in question will be black (Orissa District Gazetteers 1968:480-481), he obviously has in mind no symbolic meaning of that colour but wants to distinguish the animal from other animals of more common colour. If a black calf suddenly gives milk (Census of India 1969*b*:147), the symbolic incongruence - virginity suggests whiteness - certainly contributes to set the calf still further apart from ordinary animals.

Colours other than red, white and black occur rarely in *sthala purāṇas*. Only two legends explicitly speak of green. The green colour, however, is frequently implied, because the cow likes to pour out her milk under an isolated tree or, more commonly, in the forest. The only other colour mentioned explicitly on several occasions is gold, mostly in contexts in which otherwise blood tends to flow. When ploughing blood may well up from the ground which leads to the discovery of a *liṅgam* or an anthropomorphous idol. Alternatively, ploughing may turn up a golden box containing a divine child (Tiruppati Venkatesvarar 1973:43). Instead of a stream of blood gushing forth from a white anthill, which reveals the presence of a *liṅgam* in it, a golden bird perching on the anthill may produce the same result (Census of India 1966*a*:194) or a hunter discovers the deity when chasing a golden hare (Sontheimer 1976:156). The attraction the golden colour holds for the human eye and mind increases, if it is found in animals known not to have that colour. Furthermore *sthala purāṇas* are rendered colourful by yellow turmeric, red saffron *(kuṅkumam)* golden coloured sandal paste and red oxide *(sindur)* mostly as alternatives to red blood and by sacred ashes *(vibhūti)* mostly as an alternative to white milk.

In his famous essay on "Colour classification in Ndembu ritual: a problem in primitive classification" (1967) Turner has pointed out universal parallels from prehistory to the present day so that the occurrence of red, white and black in *sthala purāṇas* will not come as a surprise. From our indubitable preference for these three colours, however, Turner draws the conclusion that they have to be always united in a colour triad. Whenever only two colours are mentioned, the missing one, usually black, is said to be the «silent partner» (Turner 1967:68). Conversely, I should like to point out that we have not only a pronounced preference for any one of these three colours but also for any kind of pair and triad, so that a whole series of combinations exists.

The most frequent pair of colours in Indian temple legends is red and white and this not only because I have chosen milk and blood as the double focus for building up my corpus of hundreds of legends. In a Tamil *sthala purāṇas*, for instance, a white *liṅgam* is found in

a big and beautiful lotus (Census of India 1971:408), which almost certainly has to be imagined as red. Also Hindu ritual likes to contrast red and white as for instance in the red and white striped walls of South Indian temples.

White and black do not only contrast well, they are also true binary opposites on the scale of brightness so that they lend themselves to stress other oppositions especially of a moral nature. In a North Indian *sthala purāṇa* the Pāṇḍava brothers erect a *liṅgam* on a platform in the sea after they were cleansed from the sin of having killed a cow by a ritual bath at this spot and their black flag had turned white (Gujarat State Gazetteers 1969:586).

I did not come across combinations of red and black in *sthala purāṇas* but such combinations are common in the cult of bloodthirsty deities. Also the contrast between Siva and Parvati may be stressed by the colours of their skins. The dark-skinned goddes is distinguished from her red-skinned husband. It must be noted, however, that when applied to complexion the Tamil term *civappu* does not refer to focal red but to a light brown colour. *Civappu* in this case would now be called a "macrocolour" (Witkowski & Brown 1977:50), a composite category including several related hues.

In the above white-red, white-black and red-black pairs the assumption of a hidden third colour would not only be gratuitous but even logically and factually impossible. In addition to colour pairs there exist, of course, also colour triads, but Turner as well as more orthodox structuralists have overlooked that a triad need not consist of three different elements. In the *sthala purāṇa*, in which blood and milk flow from the injuried *liṅgam* and the striped flow only stops after a human being has sprinkled on some of his own blood (Mate 1970:177), the resulting colour triad is red-white-red. If Viṣṇu reveals that the anthill, in which a white board entered should be bathed with the milk of a black cow (Pidatale Sitapati 1968:125), we obtain the colour triad white-black-white or white-white-black. The assumption of a third colour would destroy the triple mention of colour names and coloured things. A triad composed of two similar or identical elements and one dissimilar element is furthermore incompatible with the structural theory of myth according to which every triad must consist of a pair of opposites and a mediator.

In his Ndembu study Turner (1967:88ff) proposes the further hypothesis that the symbolic meanings we attribute to red, white and black as well as our tendency to classify with the help ot these colours are derived from «universal human organic experience». Our idea of white is said to be due to the experience of semen and milk, that of

red stems from the experience of maternal blood and bloodshed and that of black is inspired by excreta and bodily dissolution. For anyone who has not espoused psychoanalytical doctrine, however, it should be obvious that semen is so little in evidence in everyday life that it can hardly be a model for whiteness. The association of milk with whiteness comes to mind more easily and in Arabic for instance (Guillaumont 1957:341) the same term means both 'white' and 'milk'. This need not be so, however, and Indo-European words for 'white' have nothing to do with milk. Blood is undoubtedly the most readily available representative of focal red in nature, but the infant feels attracted by the red colour long before it has seen blood. Filliozat (1957:306) has stressed that the meaning 'red' of the Sanskrit term *rakta* is older than the meaning 'blood'. Since excrements are mostly brown it should stand to reason that they cannot be the bodily experience of the black colour.

In my view it is futile to search for experiences which might explain our preference for red, white and black. Even though the evolutionary stages postulated by Berlin and Kay (1969) in the colour vocabularies of the world are becoming more and more blurred, the preeminence of white, black and red remains valid. The large measure of freedom in our thinking, for instance when combining more complex mythical motifs in infinite ways, is much reduced when it comes to the use of colours. For reasons which will probably always defy explanation the red, white and black colours have for us a particular saliency and it is this saliency which seems to be decisive for the mythmaker's choice of colours independently of and before any symbolic meaning he might wish to express through them.

## 2. Numbers

The structural theory of myth sees through its binary spectacles only the number two and that number appears in it always as a pair of opposites. In myth, however, many more numbers play a role and the dyad does not always take the form of a dichotomy.

Undoubtedly *sthala purāṇas* contain contrasting pairs such as milk and blood, the distinction of the discoverer of the idol from the builder of the temple according to caste or sex, the distinction of the injurer of the god from his healer, and many others. None of these oppositions, however, remains constant in otherwise similar legends. The majority of *sthala purāṇas* of my corpus is content with one vital fluid, the royal builder may himself discover the idol (Census of India

1965:48) and the injurer of the god may himself stop the blood (Mate 1970:126).

More frequently than as a dichotomy the number two appears as pair of similar or identical elements. Two Hanuman statues are discovered (Census of India 1965:144), two hunters injure the *liṅgam*, two servants of two brothers make the miraculous discovery of the self-milking cow (Mysore Gazetteer 1930:850, 1304) etc. In Maharashtra and neighbouring areas regularly two *liṅgas* instead of one are found. I should like to compare this form of the dyad to an ornamental double seam. Its main purpose is aesthetic but it also increases the stability of the garment. Similarly the twin motif in myth seems to pursue primarily a stylistic purpose but the fact that a number is mentioned at all attracts the listeners' attention and thus increases the impact of what has been said on their memory.

Even more frequent than pairs of identical twins are pairs of similars in Indian temple legends. The Indian gods like to send ahead one of their *alter ego* to announce the presence of their idol or to manifest themselves together with an *alter ego*. At the spot where blood gushed forth from a tree hit by an axe the next morning a *liṅgam* is discovered (Mate 1970:126), the royal sword which had miraculously disappeared is found again near a *liṅgam* (Census of India 1969*a*:201) or the child that at midnight comes to drink from a pot of milk indicates the statue of Kṛṣṇa hidden in the ground (Census of India 1964*a*:83). The Indian deities, however, do not always choose for their doubles forms well-known from mythology or in accordance with psychoanalytical theory. A tree may symbolize a god as well as a goddess, the white anthill as a place of hiding or *alter ego* is shared by gods and goddesses and Śiva may even borrow the child form of Kṛṣṇa (Ramesan 1962:52). It looks as if some mythmakers wanted above all to bring in the god redundantly, the shape through which he is repeated seems to be of secondary importance.

Repetitions in *sthala purāṇas* are not limited to divine doubles. Any element in them may at times be repeated. To give but a few examples: the discovery of the god is made first by the cow and then by a human being; the god reveals himself first in a bleeding stone and then in a dream or vice versa; the name of both the presiding deity and the place at which his temple rises are derived from the milk miracle; blood first flows from the idol and then from the wound the injurer inflicts on himself. All these repetitions do not add any meaning to the tale, they rather render what is said more impressive and thus fulfil a function similar to that of binary opposites or polarization in myth. In my view the latter hardly ever points to an existing conflict

in need of resolution as the structuralists invariably assume; instead it is a deliberate exaggeration, which amongst other things has the purpose of making the tale exemplary by removing it from reality (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1983*b*:452).

Cassirer (1925:178) wrote: «Jede einzelne Zahl ist wie von einem Zauberhauch umwittert» ('It is as if every single number were surrounded by a magical aura'). In German this sentence testifies to his poetic gift but the facts unfortunately refute it. Just as there are important and unimportant colours for the human mind so there are important and unimportant numbers, although the distinction is not quite as clear in the latter case. Apart from the number two which enjoys a special status (not by chance Stith Thompson - 1958, 5:Z. 71.10 - omits the dyad from "formulistic numbers") the number most frequently used in the spiritual cultures of the world is undoubtedly the number three. Its psychological importance is therefore comparable to that of the red colour. In *sthala purāṇas* the triad either plays a purely aesthetic role or a structural role. Instances of the first use of the triad are the discovery of three statues of Kṛṣṇa (Pal 1969:45-46) and the worship of the Śivaliṅgam by three animals (Ramesan 1962:70). The number three structures the legend, in which a snake king informs his wife how she can guess whether and what type of misfortune has befallen him. He says: «If anyone strike me or do me harm, the water in this pond will become turbid. If the Suparnas (or Garudas) seize me, the water will disappear. If a snake-charmer seize me, the water will turn red as blood» (Vogel 1972/1926:152). Both uses of the number three coincide in the Kota legend (Emeneau 1944:45), in which a cow pours out her milk at three spots. Since Kurumba, Toda and Kota villages will be founded at the sites thus miraculously indicated, the triple repetition structures the multitribal society of the Nilgiris. However, the aesthetical quality of the number three is also relevant, since not three but four or five tribes live in close interrelationship whom the legend has reduced to three for beauty's sake so to speak.

Occasionally a triad can be transformed into a structural dyad. In one legend for instance (Shulman 1980:239) a bull copulates with the cows of Indra's heaven so violently that their sweat falls on the *liṅgam*. In order to atone for this sacrilege the cows are advised to bathe the *liṅgam* with their milk and pure water for a hundred years (a favourite round number). This legend deals with the classical structural opposition of purity and impurity, but the asymmetrical doubling of one member of a dichotomy, the compensation or overcompensation of one impure liquid (sweat) by two pure liquids (milk and pure water), is incompatible with the structural theory of myth according to which

all dichotomies have to be mediated and any third element added to a pair invariably mediates between it. Triads consisting of three similar or identical elements and triple distinctions have equally escaped structuralist attention.

Many more numbers occur in Indian temple legends but for reasons of brevity I shall point out only the most frequent ones. In Indian culture at large the preference for the pentad does not lack much behind that for the triad and in Śaivism the number five indisputably dominates over any other number. Occasionally five *liṅgas* are discovered (Census of India 1964*c*:111), the *liṅgam* is one of an original group of five (Census of India 1968:175) or it breaks into five pieces (Census of India 1966*b*:25). One *liṅgam* even radiates five colours (Census of India 1966*a*:199). This detail might seem to contradict what has been said above, e.g. that the myth rarely knows more than three colours, but this is not so. The colours of the *liṅgam* are specified as: jewel, crystal, gold, diamond and *citra,* which the mythographer translates as 'all colours'. Thus three of the alleged five colours are really translucent, which might stand for white, and also *citra* has the additional meaning of 'glittering' and 'brilliant' (Macdonell 1965) so that the five colours are not more than two or three. The mythmaker apparently desired to mention the number five at all costs even if he could not substantiate it. The Indian preference for the pentad can also be inferred from the fact that the tetrad sometimes appears as a defective pentad. According to legend the Maharashtrian god Mhaskobā identified with Śiva's son Subrahmaṇya asked to be bathed in the blood of five human victims but then contented himself with four after one had escaped (Sontheimer 1976:205). In another *sthala purāṇa* god Indra in punishment for having outraged Ahalyā, the wife of ṛṣi Gautama, finds only four of the five pieces into which the Śivaliṅgam was broken (Census of India 1964*b*:4).

The heptad is far less frequent in India than in the Middle East but even there it belongs under culturally favoured numbers. A Kanarese *sthala purāṇa* manages to honour both the triad and the heptad. Śiva had ordered a king to leave the *liṅgam* found with the help of the self-milking cow covered for seven days. Impatiently the king uncovered it after three days and thereby blocked its growth so that to this day the *liṅgam* is smaller than normally (Bharanidharan 1974:228).

Maharashtra has a special predilection for the number twelve. The legend of Birobā tells that the god allowed himself to be worshipped in an anthill for twelve years before he deigned to emerge from it in snake form. When despite his strict prohibition an anthill was ploughed over, the ploughers had to do penance for twelve years. A second

identical breach of the divine command resulted in the death of twelve oxen (Sontheimer 1976:184, 186, 204).

The most important two-digit number in *sthala purāṇas* is forty. Several times the miraculous event is dated 40 years back. A Keralese legend cites a chronicle reporting that in the year 1040 the bleeding statue of a goddess was discovered. Despite its seeming historical accuracy this date sounds suspect. Stith Thompson (1958, 5:Z 71.0.2) includes among formulistic numbers «a round number plus one (101, 1001 etc.)». Formulistic numbers thus composed also occur in *sthala purāṇas* but instead of adding one to a round number the legendary chronicle date seems to be made up of the round number a thousand plus the favourite number forty.

Just as I think it futile to search for experiences which might explain our preference for the red, white and black colours so I think it futile to search for experiences responsible for our preferable choice of certain numbers for cultural purposes. All the different uses of the triad cannot be reasonably explained by reference to male genitals,as Freud believed, nor to the family consisting of father, mother and child, as Cassirer believed (1925:187). In particular, such real-life triads cannot account for the grouping of three identical objects. Quaternity cannot be derived from the four quarters of the heavens (Cassirer 1925:182) as space has no obvious four divisions, we rather project on it the number four. This is not inevitable, however, and the Indians, though they may also speak of four points of the compass, prefer to count them as eight. The pentad and the heptad can be represented spatially, it is true, by adding to the four points of the compass, the centre or else the centre, above and below, but again it must be noted that the majority of pentads and heptads are composed of identical objects for which spatial distinctions are ill-suited as models. The five fingers of one hand are certainly an omnipresent pentad in nature, but the hand might at best be a necessary condition for the love of the number five; it is clearly insufficient to explain why many cultures largely ignore the pentad, while the Indians have a predilection for it.

If no experience can satisfactorily explain why we favour certain colours and numbers, an innate mental disposition must be responsible. With this statement I do not want to advocate mental determination, because there is only a tendency and no rigid constraint. A certain amount of choice always remains, at the very least we are free to use or not use colours and numbers in folk narrative. While it might seem reasonable to assume that our preference for numbers is inversely proportionate to their size ethnographic facts belie this simple solution. In *sthala purāṇas*, and not only there, the number seven occurs much

more frequently than the number six and the number twelve outranks the number nine.

In myth, ritual and various other fields of culture we divide the infinite series of numbers unevenly just as we divide the colour spectrum unevenly for the same purposes. The mythmaker's arithmetic, however, is much richer than his palette. Whereas he uses red, white and black paint with monotonous regularity, his numbers are more varied. The numbers three and seven are found the world over, some other numbers characterize only certain cultures. The question why all this is so cannot be answered, because it would lead either to puerile and unfalsifiable claims or to an infinite regress. Numbers in *sthala purāṇas* also do not add any meaning, they rather emphasize what has been said rendering it more vivid and colourful, as it were, like the mention of colours themselves.

## Notes

1. The German version of this paper was read at the "Tagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde" held at Freiburg, October 1983.
2. The termite is known as "white ant" only in English and not in Indian languages so that this fact has no bearing on colours in *sthala purāṇas*.

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**Summary**

The article shows that folk narrative divides the colour spectrum and the infinite series of numbers unevenly. In Indian temple legends or myths mainly three colours: red, white and black crop up with monotonous regularity. The numbers mentioned are more varied, but three, five, seven, twelve and forty stand out for their frequency of occurrence. Independently of and before any symbolic meaning that might be expressed through colour the particular saliency of red, white and black colours for the human eye and mind seem to be responsible for their use in myth. Numbers do not add meaning to the tale; similar to the mention of colours they attract the listeners' attention and thereby make the tale more easily remembered. As no experience can satisfactorily explain our chromatic and numerical preferences an innate mental tendency must be responsible. It is only a tendency, however, and no rigid mental constraint, because a certain amount of choice always remains.

**Sommario**

L'articolo dimostra che la narrativa popolare divide lo spettro dei colori e la serie infinita dei numeri in parti disuguali. Nelle leggende o miti dei templi indiani soprattutto tre colori, il rosso, il bianco e il nero, appaiono con monotona regolarità. I numeri usati sono più variati, ma il tre, il cinque, il sette, il dodici e il quaranta si distinguono per la loro frequenza. Indipendentemente e prima di ogni significato simbolico, che potrebbe essere espresso attraverso i colori, la vistosità dei colori rosso, bianco, e nero sembra essere responsabile del loro uso nel mito. I numeri non aggiungono nessun significato al racconto; come i colori essi attraggono l'attenzione degli ascoltatori e così svolgono una funzione mnemonica. Siccome nessuna esperienza può soddisfacentemente spiegare le nostre preferenze cromatiche e numeriche una innata tendenza mentale deve esserne responsabile; ma è solo una tendenza e non una rigida costrizione mentale, perché esiste sempre una certa possibilità di scelta.

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